

The Last Word

In 1994, Take Asai died at the age of 102. She was the last native speaker of Sakhalin Ainu, a branch of the Ainu language spoken on Sakhalin Island. The island is about forty kilometers (km) north of Hokkaido, Japan, and when she was born (1892), Sakhalin Island was claimed by both Japan and Russia. There were 1,362 Ainu living on Sakhalin in 1905, according to the Polish linguist Bronisław Piłsudski (1866–1916), who spent fifteen years in a penal colony on Sakhalin (for taking part in a plot to kill Czar Alexander III in 1887) and spent the rest of

his life recording indigenous languages in east Asia. After World War II, all of Sakhalin Island went to Russia, and Asai and the remaining Sakhalin Ainu moved to Hokkaido. Later in her life, Asai recorded dozens of folk tales and traditional stories of the Ainu of Sakhalin. On Hokkaido there are many more people of Ainu ancestry, but fewer than 100 native speakers of the Hokkaido dialect of Ainu.

Ainu is a “language isolate”—a language without any known relatives. It was only spoken by people in northern Japan and nearby islands and has no genealogically related tongues.

There were probably many relatives in the past, but they were absorbed by the spread of Japanese. The Japanese language itself is a linguistic isolate, only spoken in Japan and affiliated islands. If there were mainland languages related to Japanese, they have been swallowed up by the expansion of the Sino-Tibetan language family, which contains around 400 distinct languages, including most dialects of Chinese. The expansion of Mandarin, the largest Sino-Tibetan tongue, was driven by the unification of the Chinese state in the third century BCE and is still gaining speakers.

The story of the loss of the last speaker of a language is a common one in the last few centuries. Just as we live in a time of widespread

Take Asai, the last speaker of Sakhalin Ainu



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biological extinctions, we are also in a period of language extinctions, and since the year 2000, the last fluent speakers of eighty-five languages have passed away. In the year 1700, according to linguist Gary Simons, at SIL International in Dallas, TX, there were an estimated 7,268 languages in use around the world, and of those 3,233, or about 44 percent, have been lost. In general, areas that were colonized by Europeans after the 1500s have seen

more language loss than other areas. In North America, for example, there were over 300 distinct, mutually unintelligible languages in use before the arrival of Europeans. They represented about fifty distinct language families (compared with only three language families for all of Europe). Of those, over 100 languages are completely extinct. Seventy-five more are spoken only by elders. Language loss is also common in the rest of the world: about a quarter of languages today are no longer taught to children and are considered endangered.

On the other side of Eurasia from Sakhalin, Basque (Euskara) is another language isolate. Spoken in the Pyrenees Mountains and the Atlantic coast near the border between Spain and France, Basque has about one million speakers. Despite the waves of people and new languages coming into Europe, Basque has proven remarkably durable. Ancient DNA research provides a clearer picture of repeated flows of



The Basque village of Mundaka, northern Spain

new populations, bringing new genes and new technologies and ways of life. Like the DNA characteristics of populations, languages also change through time and offer another way to reconstruct the human past. During the last glaciation, Europe's hominins, who had lived there for more than a million years, moved down to Iberia and other Mediterranean refuges. Among them were Neanderthals, who survived until around 37,000 years ago, when they interbred with their more recently arrived cousins, *Homo sapiens*. Basque may be in part related to the late Pleistocene languages of Iberia, or perhaps the result of an early migration of people from the steppes of western Asia.

It is thought that Basque derived from languages spoken before the arrival of people practicing a sedentary way of life, and thus is possibly related to or combined with the languages of the hunter-gatherers who were in the region many thousands of years ago. There is some support for this within the language itself: the Basque

words for axe ("aizkora"), hoe ("aitzur"), and knife ("aizto") all derive from the word for stone, "haitz."

Basque is an "ergative-absolutive language" because of the grammatical relationship between subject, object, and verbs. There are fifteen ways to conjugate verbs, and a noun phrase (e.g. "the old man") can be inflected in seventeen different ways for case, and each of those can have one of four modifiers to define how many it refers to and how definite it is. A verb can be in present, past, and future tense and modified to reflect indicative and subjunctive moods, as well as several conditional and potential moods and imperative forms. Many linguists consider Basque among the hardest human languages to learn as an adult. It is also one of the most expressive languages, with the ability to combine the meanings of words in almost limitless ways.

Basque is now an island surrounded by a sea of languages in the Indo-European language family. The hundreds of Indo-European languages began

to diverge from a common ancestor in southwest Asia about 6,500 years ago and have been transmuting and branching ever since. Indo-European also contains hundreds of other related but mutually unintelligible languages from across Europe and Asia, from eastern India to Iceland, and now throughout the Americas. Around 3.6 billion people speak Indo-European languages, making it the most widespread language family in the world. Many of these languages flowed into Europe with new migrants or differentiated from one another once in Europe. Nevertheless, Basque has resisted being erased or absorbed for thousands of years despite efforts to suppress it in the mid-twentieth century.

There are several other language isolates around the world, including a few in Africa. Africa has a complex linguistic history, with more than a dozen language families and about 2,000 distinct languages, including more than forty signed languages. The people of Madagascar speak Austronesian languages, reflecting the island's colonization from islands in southeast Asia between 350 BCE and 500 CE. Nigeria has over 500 languages, although nearly everyone speaks more than one language. About half of the 213 million Nigerians speak English, which serves as the official language.

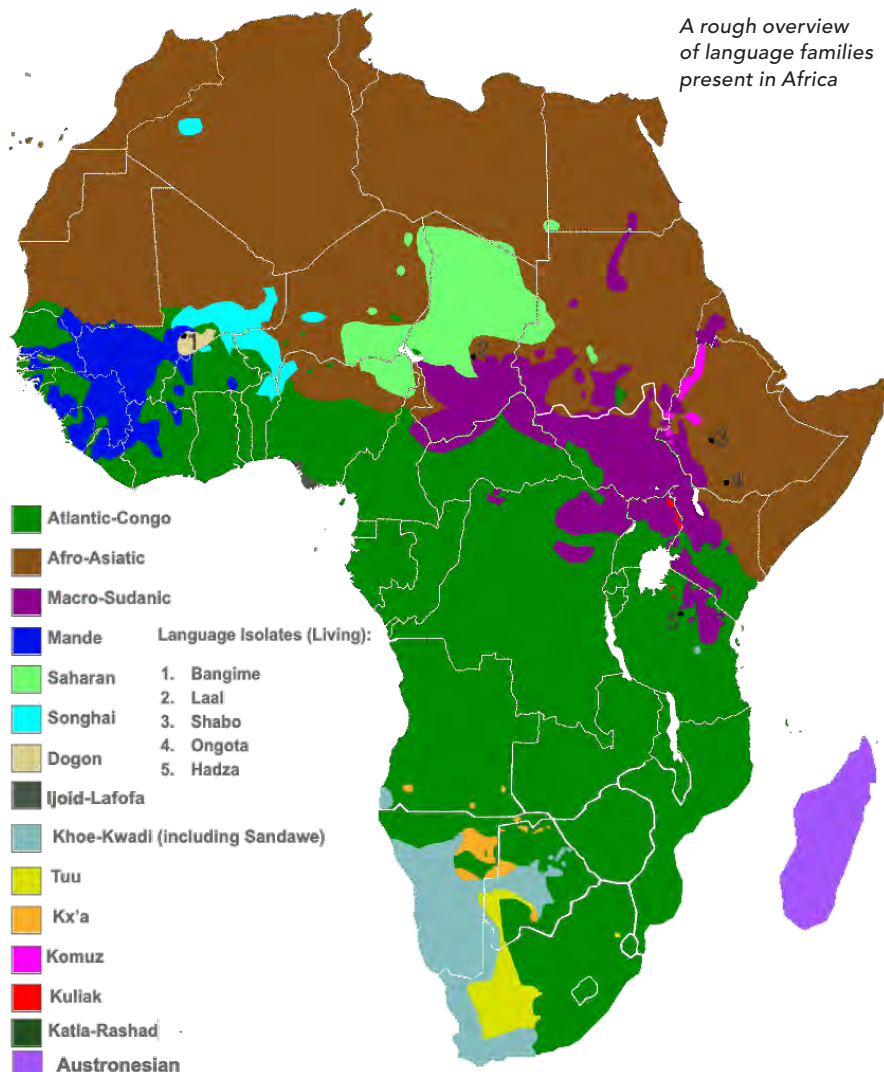
In Tanzania, East Africa, the Hadza and Sandawe people speak languages

that are each considered isolates, with no consensus about what their closest linguistic relations might be. They live within 150 km of each other along Africa's Rift Valley, but neither their languages nor DNA evidence from the speakers show a close relationship. Hadza and Sandawe speak languages with click consonants—with pops, clicks, clops, and tsks mixed in with more familiar phonemes. The two languages were long thought to have a relationship with the Khoe languages of southwestern Africa, but if so the connection is very old. The names of the northern San language called !Kung and southern Bantu language !Khosha start with an alveolar click made with the tongue and roof of the mouth, sounding a bit like a shortened palatal “clock” sound. The Taa language, spoken in Botswana, has a great many click consonants; about 80 percent of the words start with one of seven different click sounds. English has a few click consonants of its own, such as the dental click in the front of the mouth as in “tsk tsk” or “tut tut,” indicating displeasure. English also has a lateral “tchick! tchick!” made on the side of the mouth used to get a horse moving.

The Hadza language is classified as “vulnerable” by UNESCO because there are only about 1,000 native speakers. In the twentieth century, most Hadza people lived as hunter-gatherers, but in recent years there has been more pressure to participate in the economic world of surrounding Bantu, Omotic, and Cushitic speakers.

It is impossible for anthropologists to separate language from culture, because language is a product and expression of culture. In 1973, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926-2006), then at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, NJ, described culture as “a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.” These include

A rough overview of language families present in Africa



beliefs, values, practices, norms, and means of expression. We see the world through the lens of our culture, and some concepts are very strange to us if we don't have the words for them. If a person's cultural perception of the natural world is something quite different from human beings, the person will have a different understanding of the relationship to plants and animals than the person whose culture draws a less clear-cut distinction between humans and animals. In

English, humans are usually referred to as "he," "she," or "they," but animals we don't know are referred to as "it," the same as inanimate objects. English also assigns a more prominent role to the individual (versus larger groups). For some languages, there are many words that mean "you" (meaning a person other than oneself). They have a range of words that serve that function but indicate a degree of relatedness, from family member all the way to someone from an unknown culture. Conversely, the word "I" or "me" also carries a measure of relatedness to the person or thing one is referring to. In some languages there is no way to refer to "I" as a single individual that is different from "I" as a member of a family, clan, class, or other group. For speakers of such languages, the English question, "What do *you* think?" is bafflingly vague because it is unclear what "you" includes.

Built into the Ainu cultural conception of the world is the sense that everything in the world is alive and can be imbued with spirit-deities, who dwell in the world as plants,



Sandawe men from Tanzania, east Africa

animals, mountains, tides, and even the rocky spine of Hokkaido. Within Basque culture there is also the sense that more things are alive, and that there is a kin-like relationship between people, animals, and the land. By contrast, European cultures and languages place greater emphases on dichotomies between alive and dead, male and female, human and animal, culture and nature. Woven into the fabric of such cultures is the sense that humans occupy a category that is separate from nature, exceptional.

"Language is identity," wrote linguist Michael Krauss (1934-2019), of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. "Though there must be many descendants, of, say, Etruscans in Italy and Hittites in Turkey, they do not think of themselves as Etruscans or Hittites because those languages died out and were replaced by what are now Italian and Turkish." Languages are the clearest reflections of culture that we have. When a language dies out, our understanding of that particular cultural world is diminished, just as the

loss of an animal species means the loss of that particular way of adapting to the environment. On Sakhalin Island, about the time that Take Asai was born, the Ainu were already losing their lands and traditional way of life. Linguist Pitsudski recorded this prayer reflecting a different way of seeing the world, offered by the Ainu before going to sea:

To the divine bay of the ancestors, to the mighty god of the ocean, I offer this bowl of rice wine. We send our brothers, our uncles to sea, and ask that you give them back. To the god of the Earth, living in the house, I offer this bowl of rice wine to your divine, heavy Earth. The third bowl I offer to the god of the bay, honored by our ancestors, as we go to sea in the way of the Ainu to bring in our nets, and we ask that you keep your eyes on the prow of our boat.

Samuel M. Wilson is professor emeritus of anthropology at the University of Texas, author of The Emperor's Giraffe and Other Stories of Cultures in Contact, and a contributing editor to Natural History.